

## A Grunt's Primer

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Summary: "Wake up John"...It's been four long years but the deadly duo is back together and ready to kick some tail. Good mix of action, adventure, and romance for you M.C./C fans

## A Grunt's Primer

"Haha Hehehe, it's mine! I've done it!" the turtle-like grunt minor titters as he drifts through space in his oblong escape pod. It had been the last to jettison from High Charity before the flood had entirely engulfed it.

"The Great Journey will be complete! My feet will tread the footsteps of the great prophets. Oooh, they will be so proud of me". He sails off into the void with a barely visible blue Spartan helmet bouncing up and down on his grey lap

One covenant lesser prophet remains, and however much his armies may have been depleted by his various enemies during the galactic conquest, he still commands a sizeable force of brutes, who realigned themselves with the covenant after the defected chieftain was killed, jackals, and grunts. His flagship, the Faith and Remembrance floats high above a dark planet which is latticed with vast rivers of light and spires reaching into space. The bluish glow of the planet cast an eerie aura around the Faith and Remembrance.

From a barely visible mid-ship porthole, there is a faint electric blue flashing. Upon closer inspection, one might identify the glow as coming from an electric arc which, when activated, seemed to point to a figure. He was held to a metal tablet by plasma cuffs. He was shaking violently, and in stark contrast to his tall, powerful stature and deep, confident voice, he was terrified and in terrible pain. His armor had been stripped from his body and his oblong cranium and four-pronged jaw were clearly visible by the shocking light protruding from his torso. He screamed in agony and what seemed like defiance. A large, unarmored brute seemed irritated with the

figure.

"One last chance to answer me before I crush your puny body and stomp you from your unworthy existence on this hallowed ship," the brute commanded in its deep guttural voice, "did the demon escape?"

"You will get no answer from me. My eyes have been widened by the removal of the prophets' shroud and you and your people would do well to follow in our path. If the savior and the did escape, I hope he may swiftly hunt you down and brain you with your own staff. And if he did not, he has my prayer for a safe journey to the great beyond where he may be free from the insanity you so blindly help the prophets enforce in this life". The elite very nearly smiled as a lethal dose of electricity arced into his heaving chest, leaving a deep scorch mark on the downed rebel's torso.

With a satisfied grunt, the brute gestures to the grunt behind the controls that promptly flees from the room. After a moment of what seems like deep contemplation and possibly remorse, the brute unleashes a hearty laugh and turns to leave.

A few hundred thousand miles away, the forward half of a UNSC frigate drifts, lopsided, through space. The onboard smart A.I. has only the ability to see through the low definition cameras in the bridge which she currently has aimed forward through the windscreen. Her tired programming very nearly missed the very large object she was very rapidly approaching. The life-size blue hologram looked shocked; then very busy. She was trying to figure out exactly the best course of action. She had no controls, she couldn't maneuver. And she couldn't very well jump out of the craft on her own. Plus she was carrying precious cargo.

"Wake me when you need me," six words that could be interpreted in so many different ways. She always needed him. She needed him to get around. She needed him to keep her company and her sanity. She needed him to give her purpose. But most of all, she needed him because he was the only shred of hope should find in this crazy universe. He was the only one who treated her as more than a tool, but as a person, who he trusted and confided in, and as someone who he, as much as he may have been loath to admit it, cared about very deeply. And only she really knew what existed behind the mask, and how much it hurt him while she was trapped on High Charity.

She needed him. After years of trying to justify waking him, she really needed him. She started the unfreezing process. With a slight electronic giggle, her dull holographic eyes, made dull by the endless years of operational checks and repetitive behavioral algorithms that would otherwise be classified as stressful and potentially awkward emotions, brightened visibly in the first positive emotion she had felt in years that wasn't immediately crushed by a painful realization. Anyone who has ever known her and seen her appear sad knows that it is a heart-wrenching experience to witness a face, which is normally emotive and bright with excitement, look so terribly broken. But her smile brightens the room, quite literally as her hologram tends to get stronger with positive emotion and therefore brighter.

Back in the cryo bay, one chamber was hissing and clicking as its heavily armored inhabitant of four years was slowly gaining consciousness as his suit powered itself up from electronic

hibernation. He looked around to get his bearings, slightly confused before he remembered the events of a few years ago. The prophets, the power struggles, Flood ships, blowing up Halo and the Ark, the Arbiter, Gravemind, Earth, the portal—Cortana. Cortana, he smiled slightly to himself under his iconic orange visor at the thought of the sarcastic blue girl. He felt more than a little bit safer knowing that she was flying this thing—or at least trying to.

"Maybe she missed me," his deep voice came out as slightly more than a whisper. The speculation was followed by a slight chuckle as he put his weight on his feet, having some very minor issues balancing, probably do the long period in zero-G stasis.

"I heard that you know," said a playful female voice as Cortana's miniaturized avatar appeared in the holo-tank in front of the cryo tube.

"Well? Did you?" he asked, playing into the moment, a wide smile on his hidden face.

"Maybe a little," this was followed by a slight giggle and the armored man could swear the congenial computer program blushed a deeper blue on her angular cheeks. Even though she was only technically a program, a tool given to him by the military to make him a more effective warrior, he felt a strong personal connection to her, more than he cared to admit.

He remembered meeting her for the first time. It was in a briefing room and he was standing next to Lord Hood. Dr. Halsey was fiddling with a computer in the front of the room off to the left side of a large holotank on the slightly raised stage.

With a grandiose gesture, she proclaimed, "I present to you, Cortana, your new smart A.I.".

The holotank on the stage activated with a barely audible whirr and Cortana's now familiar form appeared before him. "Hello Master Chief, I am Cortana. I am looking forward to serving with you". She said it very business-like but with a warm, nervous, smile and brushed some "hair" out of her face with a thin hand. He paused, unable to react. He stood there staring dumbfounded and open-mouthed at her. He was thankful for his visor for it hid his embarrassingly stricken expression. She was beautiful. Millions of potentially dangerous thoughts sprinted through his mind before he reminded himself of his company and that "she" was just a computerized image to make it easier to interact with her—for operational efficiency.

"I—uhh," he had stuttered uncharacteristically, "thank you". To who exactly he was speaking wasn't exactly clear, even to himself. This caused both Dr. Halsey and Cortana to reply in unison.

"You're welcome". Lord Hood chuckled slightly and gestured to Halsey.

"May I have the disc?"

"Cortana?" she said.

"I'm ready," said the hologram after transferring herself into the holodisc storage device.

The Doctor removed it from the computer. "This will go in the slot on the back of your helmet. She will be able to integrate with your suit and communicate with you as well as operate your HUD functions and aid shield stability among other things". Chief nodded silently, still working on his speech capabilities.

Hood took the disc from Dr. Halsey and held it in front of Chief's face.

"Don't lose this," he said seriously, "she can fly a frigate but she can't run away or shoot anyone. That's your job. She will not fall into enemy hands. Understood?"

"Yes sir," John said in a practiced air. He took the disc in his metallic hand and jammed it into the slot on the back of his head. He shivered as an unfamiliar chill crept down his spine and realized it must be Cortana integrating herself.

"You're dismissed Chief, report to me on the bridge at 0700".

"Yes sir". With a salute, Master Chief left the room with his new companion in his head. Already chatting away as he smiled gently under his visor. They were going to get along just fine.

He remembered that he had been very reluctant to working with Cortana prior to meeting her. Being a hard-headed, cocky, young Spartan as he was, he didn't think he would ever need any help. He was fresh out of training and untested in battle. He had been totally against the idea until she materialized before him. In an instant his resentment had vanished and was replaced by curiosity. Who was she? Just exactly how smart was she? Could he be friends with a computer? Would she like him?

He was snapped out of his reverie by a soft, worried, female voice, "John? Are you okay?" she asked gently.

Chief jerked his head, "yeah. So, other than missing me, why did you wake me?"

"What, a girl can't make a social call?" she said playfully with a warm smile, brushing "hair" from her face just like the first time he met her. Once again he smiled to himself. "We are approaching a planet. We're still a few hours away, but I wanted to have you ready to go when something needs to be done," she was suddenly in operation mode. She needed to get both of them safely off this thing and not killed once they did get off.

"Which planet is it?" obviously the political stance of the planet would play a big role in their strategy.

"That's the problem. I don't really know. It's not in any records or databases anywhere. We're a long way from home".

"I'll head up to the bridge. I want to see it," John pulled himself toward the corridor leading from the cryo bay, still floating in zero gravity. Cortana followed him, popping up on the several holotanks along the way. Bouncing from wall to wall he saw just how damaged the ship really was even on the inside. If it weren't for his armor he would have been dead long ago. There was no air or life support

operational on the ship with the exception of the self-contained cryo tubes. The electrical systems were barely sustained by a backup generator near the armory which was thankfully located near the bridge on the deck below. Crew quarters made up most of the ship's bulk, and since there were no soldiers or crew on board it was mostly useless space. The Forward Unto Dawn was a giant hulking ghost ship.

"Just through here," Cortana piped up as he almost passed the hatch into the bridge.

Chief was forced to pry open the door since it was inoperable mechanically. With a grudging hiss the door slid open after he broke the seal. He pulled himself inside and stopped by grabbing onto the head of the captain's chair. He gazed out of the front windscreen and saw it. Cortana appeared in the full-size holotank next to him, flickering red before solidifying into her familiar soft blue. This yanked John's attention away from the planet ahead.

"She's easy to get along with. I know, she's me," this was followed by a slight giggle, "but don't get too attached. Eventually she will fall into rampancy and literally think herself to death. By my calculations she should give you a good seven years".\_

Dr. Halsey's voice echoed in his head. He'd only known Cortana for two years. But with the time he spent in cryo and her unusual operating bases (forerunner and covenant as well as UNSC technology), it could be rampancy.

"Cortana, how long was I out?"

"N-n-n-n-n-not too long". She glitched slightly as she tried to lie to him.

"Don't lie to me. How long was I out?" he requested more sternly.

"Four years," she admitted, almost embarrassed about it. She "sat" cross-legged looking for all the world like she was about to cry.

"Are these glitches," he paused, not wanting to say it out loud as if it might be avoided entirely by ignoring it, "rampancy?"

"No," she answered a little too quickly, "just the failing systems on this ship are m-m-m-m-making it hard to sustain an avatar". Her image distorted momentarily before returning to normal.

He tried to convince himself that was true. The Dawn was horribly damaged and underpowered. It was also a very old system, not designed to handle a Smart A.I. It was just the ship's bad systemsâ€|that was it.

She had never had reason to lie to him before. Why would she lie now? He had trusted her with his own life hundreds of times; trusted her with every life in the galaxy more than four times. Why couldn't he trust her with her own? He wasn't going to let go of it, at least not yet. There were more pressing issues at hand though.

He looked out at the planet before them in wonderment. It was

shocking and looked almost artificial. The bright paths of light on the surface formed some familiar patterns, but he assured himself that he was just assigning meaning to nothing.

Suddenly, a massive explosion rocks the ship, blowing him out of his spot above the captain's chair. He's blasted back through corridors until he finds himself once again in the cryo bay, where Cortana is on the pedestal looking terrified. He yanks her mobile drive from the pedestal and shoves it into his helmet, reveling in the familiar feeling of her integrating. He grabbed a thruster pack that was floating nearby and took off down the hall, grabbing a pistol from mid-air as he blasted through a room full of debris. He fired a single shot into a door that was obstructing his path and it flew out into space in a fireball. He shot outside and grabbed a girder, stopping himself at a good vantage point. The planet now had a perfectly circular glowing ocean. It seemed to be opening like a great iris. The ship had just gotten pulled into the planet's gravity and was falling directly into the gaping maw. He had minutes before the ship plummeted inside the mysterious hole. He needed a real weapon.

He jumped from the girder he was standing on and used his thruster pack to maneuver into an armory window which was just a deck below and with an outstretched arm he rocketed through the reinforced composite window. He loaded himself up with anything tough enough to survive the journey: 6 clips of pistol ammo, a black steel combat knife on each elbow, and a faithful assault rifle. Sprinting out the window again, he shot to the rear of the half-ship and straight into the exposed motor pool and picked the least damaged warthog, loaded it up with supplies and ammo and fuel, and shoved it out the back, grabbing onto the rear bumper at the last second.

He pulled himself into the driver's seat and strapped in. "Let's have some fun," he said as it tilted off the rear edge of the craft and plummeted on its own toward the planet. Chief removed his thruster pack and aimed it squarely behind the vehicle. He activated it and his extremely powerful arm held it in place as it propelled the warthog forward through space. It would be a good half-hour fall from this altitude, so he got comfy and enjoyed the ride, periodically adjusting something on the dashboard or adjusting the course with the rudimentary propulsion and navigation system of his right arm and a jetpack.

He looked back at the Forward unto Dawn being sucked into the core of the planet, "damnâ€¦looks expensive". Cortana laughed despite herself. They watched in awe as the mysterious planet they were hurtling toward "ate" the frigate.

The warthog by itself could survive the impact. The Spartan had a thruster pack and landing would be no trouble for him. The warthog however, could not withstand the impact with the half-ton Spartan in the front seat. About 2000 feet up, he jumped out after reattaching the thruster pack to his armor and was seemingly thrown upward from the warthog which had a greater terminal velocity than he did.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Cortana chipped in warningly.

Without a response, Master Chief entered a headlong dive toward the ground and just seconds before impact, activated the boosters and

touched down softly on the dark surface. The warthog had landed just thirty feet away and he jogged over to go retrieve it. The vehicle was tough, he'd give it that. It had a small crack in the upper left corner of the windscreen and the equipment had been jarred and spread around in the impact, but it had even landed right-side-up.

"I gotta remember to thank whoever designed these things," he said jokingly as he jumped in the driver's seat, "where are we going Cortana?"

"I know just as much about this place as you do. I would suggest going to see what swallowed the Dawn, it's just a few hundred miles east of here".

A little blue arrow appeared on his HUD and the warthog started with a satisfying roar. He floored the accelerator and shot off into the distance.

End  
file.